7 KEYS TO IMPROVING YOUR CHINESE LISTENING SKILLS FAST

by

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If you've ever had a similar feeling when communicating with people in Mandarin, rest assured you're not alone!

In my 10+ years of teaching the language I've found that many learners frequently struggle more to understand naturally spoken Mandarin than to get their own message across in conversation.

And while comprehension gets better over time if you practise speaking with many different people on a regular basis, progress will likely be painstakingly slow if you rely on this as the only way to improve...

That's why, in the following pages, I'll share some of my very best tips and strategies for practising listening on your own – effectively!

Whether you read the guide cover to cover or just skim through and check out the "cheatsheet" at the end, I hope you come away with a few hacks that can help save you time (and sanity...) in your quest to understand spoken Chinese and have meaningful conversations with native speakers.

Now, without further ado, let's dive in!

- Angel Huang
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CHOOSE APPROPRIATE LISTENING MATERIALS.
If you’re looking to **improve your listening ability significantly in a short amount of time**, just listening to **anything** you come by is NOT your best bet. The audio/video materials you use should be:

**✓ Suitably Challenging**

“Ok, does this mean I should listen to things that I can understand fairly easily or should I challenge myself with something a bit harder?”

The answer is... **YES**!

**Yes, you should listen to things you find easy.** Not only does this help boost your confidence, it’s also the best way to get to a point where you can instantly recognise and understand words you know as they’re spoken to you in real time.

**Yes, you should definitely challenge yourself with something a bit harder.** In the real world you’ll frequently NOT understand everything you hear. By practicing listening to more challenging materials you can learn to cope with this reality and get better at guessing what things mean. But...
... this doesn’t mean that listening to recordings where you understand next to nothing is ideal — far from it! Instead, you should understand most of what you hear to be able to effectively “fill in the gaps” and figure out the meaning of unfamiliar bits where necessary.

Aright, now try this... Play the video below and listen to a woman talking about what she usually does with her family. Is this a "fairly easy", "a bit more challenging" or an "understand next to nothing" clip for you?

Well..?
✔ Interesting and Relevant

Stay motivated and focused by listening to short clips on topics you’re genuinely interested in!

If you’re also familiar with the topic and it is relevant to your learning goals — *i.e. directly related to the type of situations and conversations you want to be able to understand and use the language in*) — you’ll get a lot more out of it.

✔ As "Real" as Possible

If you want to understand Mandarin as it’s really spoken by regular people across China, *the recordings you find in most study materials made for learners (textbooks, podcasts, software etc) will only get you so far... Why!?*

Simply because real spoken Mandarin sounds VERY different from scripted and rehearsed speech recorded by actors at slower than normal speed and perfectly “standard” pronunciation... To get used to and prepare yourself for the real thing, listen to (recordings of) real people speaking naturally and spontaneously.
Transcribed (in pinyin and/or characters)

As often as possible, listen to clips that come with a transcript so that you can compare what you think you heard to what was actually said!

To really make the most of the transcript, try to write down what you hear word-for-word first, and then use the transcript to check what you missed and got right. This is easily one of the most effective ways to develop your ability to make sense of natural connected speech.

SUMMARY:

**Choose appropriate listening materials**

- Listen to fairly easy AND slightly more challenging content.
- Stay motivated & focused by listening to short clips on interesting & relevant topics.
- Prepare for real world situations by listening to naturally spoken Mandarin.
- Try to find clips that come with a transcript so you can compare what you heard to what was actually said.
SET REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS AND STAY COOL.
When you listen to a new audio or video clip for the first time, there will more than likely be several things you don’t understand. *How do you react in that situation?*

**A)** Get Discouraged, conclude that it’s too difficult for you and Give up.

**B)** Accept that not understanding 100% the first time you listen is 100% normal. Relax and listen again.

Many learners habitually do “A” and build up a mental barrier that makes listening and understanding even harder and more frustrating for them in the long run. **Mindset matters!**

So, unless you really understand almost nothing the first time you listen, don’t start looking for another clip right away… and don’t let frustration get the best of you. Do "B"!

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**SUMMARY:**

**SET REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS AND STAY COOL**

- *Accept the fact that NOT understanding 100% the first time you listen to something is 100% normal.*

- *Relax and stay calm when you listen.*
REPEAT, REPEAT AND REPEAT SOME MORE.
The first time you listen to a new audio or video clip you probably understand some parts of it right away. Other parts though, hit you like a “wall of sound”! *You can't tell what individual words it’s made up of or where one word ends and another begins*...

Now, if you have a script or subtitles for the clip, it might be tempting to immediately check what you missed and look up unfamiliar words — **Don’t!** … Not yet.

Instead, **just play the clip again — x2, x5, x15... and let repetition work its magic!** *(Tip: Use short clips — roughly 15-75 seconds long — to quickly “get into the flow” and stay focused as you listen over and over.)*

**Each time you listen you notice something new** — e.g. *details in pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and in the overall meaning of what the speaker is saying.* Your brain connects this to things you already know AND gets better at recognising familiar words and phrases faster.

If there are certain bits of the clip you really struggle with, try listening a few times at a slower speed *(if you’re watching a Youtube video you can slow down the speed in the player settings, and if you’re listening to an audio clip you can do this with a free tool called "Audacity").*
With enough repetition, what seemed crazy fast the first time you listened, now seems slower. What seemed unclear, seems clearer.

When you eventually get to a point where you feel like you’ve understood as much as you can by simply listening to the clip repeatedly… grab the script and compare it to what you think you heard. Listen again (and again and…), now reading along with the script to get better at matching what you hear to it’s written form.

**SUMMARY:**

**REPEAT, REPEAT AND REPEAT SOME MORE**

- Always *listen to a clip MANY times before you look at the transcript/subtitles.*
- Check your understanding and get better at matching what you hear to how it’s written (in pinyin or characters) by *reading along with the transcript as you listen to the clip a few more times.*
- Use *short clips* (15-75 seconds) to make it easy to listen *actively* many times in a short period of time.
GET THE GIST BEFORE YOU DRILL DOWN INTO THE DETAILS.
Listening in the real world is about communication — it’s about **getting the message**.

To do this, **we don’t need to catch every word.** In fact, when we listen in our **first language** we can miss big chunks of what someone is saying and still understand exactly what they’re communicating because...

... **we pick out keywords and use context to make sense of what we hear.**

Unfortunately, many of us don’t do this particularly well when we listen in a second language. Instead **we often get lost or left behind trying to understand every word or translate words we “half-know” into our first language**... **This takes the focus away from actually listening to what we’re hearing!**
Train yourself to avoid getting lost in details by making a habit of always trying to understand the gist first when you practise listening.

Once you’ve got the gist you can listen again and concentrate on getting the details of the recording (e.g. the exact words, phrases and grammar the speaker used or didn’t use…).

**SUMMARY:**

It’s usually **NOT necessary** to understand every word of what someone says to get their overall **message** — **Keywords + context** goes a long way.

When you practise listening, focus on understanding the gist (i.e. **getting the message**) **first**, before concentrating on the details of the clip.
GUESS MEANING FROM CONTEXT.
No matter what you listen to, **contextual clues** can often help you figure out the meaning of unknown words and get the gist of what you’re hearing.

Are you using these clues effectively..?

Using these clues effectively and automatically is a skill that you can improve quickly through practice. How? Let’s look at an example.

**Example**

Let’s say you’re going to listen to a short conversation between a shop assistant and two customers in a small clothing store. (you will in fact do that below...
1. Before you listen, activate your background knowledge and predict what you’ll hear by asking yourself:

- What do I already know about this topic/situation? (e.g. What are some things customers often want to find out before buying clothes?)
- What words and phrases do people often use in this type of situation? WRITE THEM DOWN.

Watch the video and see if any of your answers are similar to what you hear/see in the video.

2. If there are important phrases or words in the conversation that you don’t understand, listen again and try your very best to use contextual clues to guess the meaning.
For example, if you didn’t understand the shop assistant’s answer in the conversation...

Customer 1: nà jiàn lǐ fú duō shǎo qián? (How much is that dress?)
Shop assistant: jiǔ qiān jiǔ bāi jiǔ shí jiǔ kuài. (Nine thousand nine hundred ninety-nine Yuan)
Customer 2: jiǔ qiān jiǔ bāi jiǔ shí jiǔ ? tài guī le! (Nine thousand nine hundred ninety-nine Yuan? Too expensive!)

... you might use the clues as below to guess that the shop assistant said “Nine thousand nine hundred ninety-nine Yuan”...

“Language-related”

- The meaning of words before & after the word(s) you’re trying to understand
  - The question is: “How much is that dress?” so it’s probably an amount of money.
  - Also, the response is “It’s too expensive” so it’s probably not a small amount...

- how the word is formed
  - I don’t understand all the stuff in between... but I think I hear the number “jiǔ” (jiǔ) four times...

- body-language (gestures & facial expressions)
  - The customer looks surprised/shocked when the shop assistant says the price so, yes, she must feel that it’s very expensive

“Situational”

- what you know about the topic & situation
  - It’s in China so the currency is RMB (¥)
  - Most people don’t want to pay “too much”...
SUMMARY:

**GUESS MEANING FROM CONTEXT**

1. **Contextual clues** can often help you figure out the meaning of unknown words and get the gist of what you’re listening to.

2. Develop the skill of using contextual clues by 1) actively predicting what you will hear before you listen and 2) using your knowledge of both the language and the topic/situation to work out the meaning of words and phrases that you don’t understand.
LEARN THE RIGHT VOCABULARY, THE RIGHT WAY.
It pretty much goes without saying that the more Chinese words you “know”, the better your chances of understanding native speakers will be. But, simply trying to memorise lots of random new words is not a great use of time...

Here are three things to consider when deciding **what vocabulary to learn** and **how to learn it**:

**1. Learn vocabulary you’re likely to come across and use**

To do this make sure you...

A) are crystal clear about what types of situations YOU most want to be able to understand native speakers in. *List them out.*

  - **When chatting about movies with my friends**
  - **When haggling about prices at a local market**
  - ...................................................................................................................

B) focus on learning vocabulary people actually use in those specific situations.

By doing this, you are not only **more likely to commit the new words to memory** in the first place — there’s also a good chance that **they’ll get reinforced naturally** over time since you’ll likely hear them again on a regular basis.

*So, whenever you listen to an audio or video clip on a topic that’s interesting/relevant to you, make a point of picking out and studying new vocabulary from it.*
2. Learn phrases and sentences, not just individual words

Whether you use a notebook or Spaced Repetition System app to record and review vocabulary, try to make a habit out of NOT filling it with isolated words…

Instead, when you come across a new word you want to learn, note it down exactly as you found it — i.e. as part of a phrase or short sentence. Like this example with the word “do” in the question “What are you doing”?:

New word: ɡàn (千)
Sentence you heard/saw it in: nǐ zài ɡàn shén me? (你在干什么?)
What you note down: nǐ zài ɡàn shén me? (你在干什么?)

Why do it this way?

Because… native speakers think and talk in “chunks” (groups of words). When they speak naturally, they don’t pronounce every individual word clearly.

By learning chunks it’ll be easier for you to process what they say and focus on the actual message instead of getting left behind trying to decode individual words…

3. Pay special attention to sounds and tones

Change suì to shuì and “year (of age)” becomes “sleep”… Change wèn to wěn and “ask” becomes “kiss”…

Having a good grasp of the sounds and tones of Mandarin is not only necessary to make yourself easily understood, it’s also crucial for understanding native speakers.
With this in mind, always write down new words and chunks with tone marks and practice pronouncing both the sounds and the tones as accurately as you possibly can. By improving your own pronunciation, you’ll also get better at understanding others’.

But, and it’s a BIG but, the same word or phrase can sound very different when pronounced by different people — not least due to differences in accent. To improve your chances of “effortlessly” recognising words when you hear them spoken in the real world you need to practise listening to a variety of speakers (not just the one or two included in your textbook audio recordings…).

SUMMARY:

LEARN THE RIGHT VOCABULARY, THE RIGHT WAY

Be clear about what types of situations YOU most want to be able to understand native speakers in and learn vocabulary people use in those specific situations.

Learn new words in "chunks" (i.e. as part of a phrase) rather than in isolation.

Always write down new words and phrases with tone marks. Practice pronouncing both the sounds and the tones as accurately as you possibly can. Get feedback!
MAKE LISTENING A DAILY HABIT.
"Make listening a daily habit."

Sounds simple, doesn’t it? Well, it can be — the key to consistency is to start small and scale up.

**Start small and scale up**

Set an easily achievable goal — e.g. to listen for 10 minutes a day, every day.

Chances are you will succeed, feel good about it and keep going! Once you’ve got into the habit of doing it consistently, you can raise the bar.

*Remember: 10 minutes of active listening EVERY day will do a lot more for your listening ability than 70 minutes once a week.*

**Find the time**

If you’re busy and feel like you don’t have time, the first step toward making it happen is to break down a typical day into small “blocks” and look for opportunities to squeeze in a few minutes of listening here or there.

For example, could you listen during or between any of these blocks?

- **As you get ready in the morning**
- **While eating breakfast**
- **On your way to work/school**
- **During your lunch break**
- **On your way home from work/school**
- **....**

Well..?
While certain blocks in your day are probably perfect for having Chinese music, TV etc. playing *in the background* while you’re focusing your attention on something else, try to **identify at least one block where you can listen actively** (i.e. when you’re 100% focused on listening). Once you have decided on a block, or even a specific time (e.g. 7pm), **add it as a recurring event in your calendar**.

By making listening part of your daily routine, you’re more likely to **consistently** take small steps toward your goal of understanding native speakers, even on days when you’re “not in the mood”…

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**SUMMARY:**

**MAKE LISTENING A DAILY HABIT**

- Break down a typical day into **small blocks**. Identify blocks where you can **listen actively**.

- Set an **easily achievable goal** (e.g. to listen actively for 10 minutes a day) and **plug your listening slot(s) into your calendar** as a recurring event.

- When you **get into the habit of achieving the "easy goal"**, you can **scale up**.

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1. **Choose Appropriate Listening Materials**

- Listen to **fairly easy AND slightly more challenging content**.
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- Prepare for real world situations by listening to **naturally spoken Mandarin**.
- Try to find clips that come with a **transcript** so you can check your understanding.

2. **Set Realistic Expectations and Stay Cool**

- Accept the fact that **NOT understanding 100% the first time you listen to something is 100% normal**.
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- It’s usually **NOT** necessary to understand every word of what someone says to get their overall message. **Keywords + context** goes a long way.
- When you practice listening, focus on **understanding the gist (i.e. getting the message)** first, before concentrating on the details of the clip.

### 5 GUESS MEANING FROM CONTEXT

- **Contextual clues** can often help you **figure out the meaning of unknown words** and **get the gist** of what you’re listening to.
- **Develop the skill** of using contextual clues by 1) **actively predicting what you will hear** before you listen and 2) **using your knowledge of both the language and the topic/situation** to work out the meaning of words and phrases that you don’t understand.

### 6 LEARN THE RIGHT VOCABULARY, THE RIGHT WAY

- Be clear about **what types of situations** YOU most want to be able to understand native speakers in and learn vocabulary people use in those specific situations.
- **Learn new words in "chunks"** (i.e. as part of a phrase) rather than in isolation.
- **Always write down new words and phrases with tone marks.** Practice pronouncing both the sounds and the tones as accurately as you possibly can. Get feedback!

### 7 MAKE LISTENING A DAILY HABIT

- Break down a typical day into **small blocks**. Identify blocks where you can **listen actively**.
- Set an **easily achievable goal** (e.g. to listen actively for 10 minutes a day) and **plug your listening slot(s) into your calendar** as a recurring event.
- When you get into the habit of achieving the "easy goal", you can **scale up**.